

LETTER TO A FRIEND COMING TO SAIGON -- (EXCERPTS)

From Daniel Ellsberg

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(OCO and the GVN

mentioned to me your emphasis on the need to work closely with MACV and, of course, I agree fully. But what demands equal (or, I really believe, even greater) emphasis is the need to work closely with Vietnamese, especially, but not exclusively, within the GVN: much more closely than the US Mission has ever done in the past and, quite specifically, more closely than OCO has been doing until now.

Although I think that OCO has accomplished more and has shown more promise than I expected six months ago in the area of coordinating and rationalizing US civil efforts, one major disappointment to me has been the tendency to focus almost exclusively upon these problems of US organization and effort, rather than upon relations with and influence upon Vietnamese. What seems insufficiently realized is that the US role in pacification -- with the single exception of the US battalions assigned to clearing missions -- remains and will remain for a considerable period predominantly an advisory effort, whose success must be measured in terms of effective influence upon Vietnamese and successful performance by Vietnamese. This will remain true on the civil side, no matter who ends up controlling the US effort; and, indeed, it will continue to be true even on the military side until the US input in support of RD becomes vastly greater than it is now.

Perhaps it was natural and inevitable that OCO managerial attention should be focused initially upon "getting our own house in order," but, in view of fundamental priorities, it is urgent that much more attention should now be given to improving the effectiveness of our influence upon the GVN, and to the organizational requirements of that task. The fact is that a number of basic policy decisions -- some of them highly questionable -- have been made by Thang in the last six months that reflect almost no US input or influence whatever by any US agency or individual. Liaison with the MORD is insufficient over-all, uncoordinated and ineffective; and this applies to the two distinct areas of coordination at the staff level and at the high, decision-making level.

On the one hand, it is necessary to institutionalize far more frequent, intimate and coordinated liaison: indeed, jointness of planning and operation, rather than mere "liaison" or "advice". As of now, the mutual confidence and cooperation in planning that exists in many provinces between US advisors and the Province Chief does not exist to any comparable degree at the Saigon MORD/OCO/MACV/JGS level. The Joint Inspection Teams offer a good opportunity for developing a common understanding of major current problems; OCO should give much more attention to able, qualified representation on these Teams. A Joint Planning and Research Operation would be highly desirable, with membership from OCO, MORD, MACV and JGS. More individuals should be assigned to liaison work, and there should be far more communication and contact at all levels in Saigon. This goes beyond formal organization; it is, to a large extent, a matter of attitude and orientation toward the fundamental task of the US Mission with respect to pacification; i.e., the task of improving and supporting the Vietnamese efforts in this area. (The notion that "we must do it for them, if they can't or won't do it" has some - important - validity in limited, short-run terms, but it commonly hides a wealth of wishful thinking about what we can do by ourselves in the areas related to pacification.)

On the other hand, apart from questions of formal organization and the scale of liaison effort, the matter of effective personal relations with Vietnamese and personal ability to influence specific Vietnamese is of great importance. These are not talents that everyone has, whatever their rank and other qualities of expertise or character. It is essential to begin making a considerable effort in Viet Nam to find and to employ effectively US individuals with special abilities (or with a potential based upon past contacts and friendships) in the sphere of communicating and establishing rapport with, learning from, and influencing key Vietnamese decision makers. (Ed Lansdale and Rufus Phillips are deservedly famous examples of outstanding talent and experience in this line; in OCO, Mark Huss and especially Len Maynard have an unusually wide number of warm friendships with influential Vietnamese, an asset almost never exploited by USAID, OCO, or the Political Section; and there have been a number of individuals in MACV, OSA, or the Political Section who had either general talents in establishing rapport or who had valuable friendships for special reasons, yet there has rarely been a systematic effort to find or use these individuals profitably.)

Another aim should be much wider contact with Vietnamese outside the MORD and even outside the GVN and ARVN, in connection with pacification matters, to the ends:

- a. Drawing in a broader range of Vietnamese attitudes and views -- both "objective" and partisan -- on GVN and US performance; on the concepts and aims of pacification as publicly understood; on alternative approaches and possibilities for improvement; and on prospects and VC counter-measures. (A number of conversations I have had recently with members of the Constituent Assembly and with Vietnamese journalists on the subject of pacification have proven extremely informative and thought-provoking: indeed, far more than most conversations I have had with ARVN officers or GVN officials in Saigon.)
- b. Involving officials outside the MORD and ARVN, and more broadly, individual social groups and organizations outside the GVN, in thinking about and contributing to the goals of pacification. This includes specifically Constituent Assembly members, and later, members of the National Assembly, as well as other opinion leaders, such as Vietnamese newspaper editors and political and religious leaders. Ultimately, the fight against the VC must involve the resistance of the non-Communist Vietnamese society, and that means not only involving group loyalties on the side of the GVN, but enlisting the creative, imaginative efforts of groups and individuals and inspiring them to take initiatives in the struggle. As of now, almost no effort has been made to do this in the pacification effort.

However, although the "organization of personal influence" in a deliberate systematic way is both an important and highly neglected matter, it should not be the only instrument on which US purposes in Viet Nam depend. The question of the alternative forms, channels modalities of US influence upon the Vietnamese Government, upon other Vietnamese institutions and groups and, in general, upon events within Viet Nam, is a matter that deserves conscious, high level, expert examination. Scattered personal intuitions of high Mission figures on this matter have proven inadequate in the past.

It is simply essential that our influence within Viet Nam become more effective. To say that is not to prejudice the case in favor of one form or another of influence, and specifically is not a euphemistic way of saying that we must necessarily become "tougher", more overt in our pressures, or must "take over" the GVN covertly or overtly, let alone to call for a flat-footed, heavy-handed, bungling, ignorant and incompetent program of coercion. (The latter might seem to go without saying, except that every time one speaks of exerting more, and more effective influence upon our allies, those who generally favor "nonintervention" point to some crude, abortive exercise by the US having just the qualities cited -- often, a venture they participated in themselves, "against their better judgment" -- and as evidence of the risks and infeasibility of influencing Vietnamese.

Examples: Taylor's efforts to get Khanh and the generals to reverse their dissolution of the High National Council, spring of 1965; USAID pressure to have the Province Chief of Binh Tuy removed, fall of 1965.)

The insight and experience of people -- for instance in OSA and the Political Section -- with broad background in such matters should be focused upon laying out explicitly, for once, the alternative paths and instruments by which we could hope to make our purposes effective in Viet Nam. (The whole MACV advisory system stands, of course, as the most egregious example of the failure of US influence and policy, next to our dealings with Diem; the reasons for this deserve close examination and remedy: this urgent task would be fairly easy, though painful.) Ironically, the problem is how to achieve something like the degree of influence that nearly all Vietnamese believe we already have.

Politics and Pacification

I know that you are already alert to monitor closely, coordinate with and influence military policies and programs related to security and pacification; I am sure you don't propose to be boxed into the "purely civil" aspects of pacification, which would be to giving fateful hostages to MACV's competence and insight. What is less likely to be appreciated is the sensitivity of success in the sphere of security and pacification to political developments both in Saigon and in provincial government. Even if your sphere of influence is centered upon pacification, you will have a vital interest in such questions as the nature of national leadership, the composition and role of the National Assembly, and the growth of representative institutions in the countryside, and, of course, in US policies and influence related to all these matters.

Indeed, in my opinion, the success of pacification efforts, as of much else, depends far more upon military/police efforts, on the one hand, and on political developments, on the other, than on any other activities currently within the province of OCO. (We have discussed the military side of this at length; I have only come fully to appreciate the role of the political side in the last several months, and I now would place at least as much emphasis on that.) You cannot afford to be denied full voice and access to information and influence in either of these areas.